DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 204 902 EC 133 369

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TITLE A Critique of Externally Oriented Behavior Management Approaches as Applied to Exceptional Black Children.
PUB DATE Feb 81
NOTE 10p.: Paper presented at The Council for Exceptional Children Conference on The Exceptional Black Child (New Orleans, LA, February, 1981, Session I-2).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Behavior Change: *Behavior Problems: *Black Students: Contingency Management: *Disabilities: Elementary Secondary Education: Negative Reinforcement: Punishment

ABSTRACT

The paper looks at philosophical, heuristic, and practical reasons why behavior management approaches have failed to positively impact on the lives of exceptional Black children. Critiqued are behavior modification techniques, contingency management strategies, suspensions, expulsions, and positive and negative reinforcement. Noted among the problems with such methods are the determination of what constitutes a discipline problem, the tendency of teachers to use approaches as control tactics rather than teaching students to become self directing individuals, and transferrance of negative reinforcers outside the academic setting thus inhibiting the life long maturation of exceptional Black children. It is stressed that the teacher's role must be viewed within the context of facilitating self direction and control on the part of the student and not within the traditional authoritarian context of acting as an agent of control. (SB)

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A CRITIQUE OF EXTERNALLY ORIENTED BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT APPROACHES AS APPLIED TO EXCEPTIONAL BLACK CHILDREN

A PAPER PRESENTED AT THE FIRST ANNUAL COUNCIL FOR EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN CONFERENCE ON THE EXCEPTIONAL BLACK CHILD
February 15-17, 1981
NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA

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A CRITIQUE OF EXTERNALLY ORIENTED BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT APPROACHES AS APPLIED TO EXCEPTIONAL BLACK CHILDREN

It has been consistently proposed that one of the factors affecting the educational welfare of exceptional black children, particularly those who are poor, is their so-called inability to produce those social behaviors in the classroom setting that teachers perceive as being appropriate. This has subsequently led to a plethora of discussion, programs, approaches, and "models" for modifying black children's behavior to make them more congruent to those social behaviors deemed essential by the schools. Behavior modification approaches ranging from punishment to positive reinforcement strategies have become standard gear for the neophyte and seasoned teacher alike. For some of the popular techniques, (Becker, Madsen, Arnold, and Thomas, 1967; Patterson, 1966) there is little, if any, data documenting their effectiveness to produce long-range change in student behavior. As Patterson (1971) points out in his review of token classrooms, there is considerably less evidence supporting the carry over effects on students after they leave these special classrooms, and little evidence that decreases in "deviant" behavior are accompanied by increase in learning.

There appear to be philosophical, heuristic, and practical reasons why these external forms of management techniques have failed to positively impact on the lives of exceptional black children. Within this context, this paper offers a brief critique of the popular management strategies used with exceptional black learners, e.g., behavior

modification techniques, contingency management strategies, suspensions, expulsions, and positive and negative reinforcement. Specifically, the external domination and control aspects of these techniques will be explored and their implications on the positive life progression and liberating personalities of exceptional black children and their teachers will be illuminated.

An examination of the extent of "discipline" problems is at once difficult and simple; difficult because disruptive behaviors are usually not manifested in clearly defined actions with labels attached to them (Rivers, 1977). Therefore, a determination of what constitutes a "discipline" problem can be arbitrarily arrived at and is highly dependent upon the value system of those defining the behavior. If the student's value system is not consonant with that of the teacher, the principal definer of disruptive behavior, the outcomes are often detrimental to the positive maturation of the individual student. What might constitute appropriate behavior in the axiological system of the child could very well constitute disruptive behavior as defined by the teacher. Teachers may easily regard exceptional Black children's behavior as strange or peculiar, not because it is inherently that way, but because it does not conform to some Anglocentric model of behavior ascribed to by many middleclass teachers.

However, if one were to read the results of the Phi Delta Kappan annual public opinion survey, one would find that "discipline" (however defined) has been the number one problem in the schools for the past 13

years. Further, the extent of the problem can be easily determined by ascertaining the time spent by teachers in dealing with "disciplinary" problems. A study by Roberts (1967) indicated that in suburban schools, teachers spent 30 per cent of their time on "management" problems, (acting-out behaviors, active student resistence and passive student resistence) while their counterparts in urban schools spent 80 per cent of their time with these concerns. It is apparent then that, notwithstanding the difficulty in defining "disciplinary" problems, disruptive behavior in our schools constitutes a major concern and must be recognized as a threat to the continued survival of exceptional Black students.

The modification of disruptive behavior can be viewed along a management continuum ranging from external modification techniques to internally oriented approaches. Those approaches and models which cluster around the external end of the continuum have served as the primary means for teachers to deal with behavior problems of exceptional Black children. Unfortunately, the misuse and overuse of these techniques too often stifles these students' life progression and desire for an education with liberating qualities. In the next section of this paper, a critique of the traditional management strategies, i.e., those which traditionally fall under the rubric of behavior modification, positive and negative reinforcement, suspensions, expulsions, and the like, will be offered.

It is axiomatic that the type of behavior children produced in the classroom is partially the result of the way they are treated by

teachers. Many disciplinary problems that arise in the classroom, then, can be attributed to the interface of the student and teachers. Much of the problems in the classroom result from the use of traditional management approaches which have focused on externally oriented behavioral control, rather than behavioral change or self-control (Polsgrove and Mosley, 1975).

Perhaps one of the most overriding criticisms of externally oriented management techniques is the tendency of teachers to use these approaches as control tactics rather than teaching students to become self-directing individuals. As Polsgrove and Mosley (1975) have indicated, many otherwise promising teachers resort to interpreting and utilizing traditional management approaches as control tactics which often results in making students behaviorally stifled, docile, overcompliant, and further doubt their abilities. Additionally, the use of these approaches in this vain has the tendency to foster impulsive conformity in students and often turns them off to school and learning (Polsgrove and Mosley, 1975). Many mentally retarded and behaviorally disordered Black children have histories of failure and have developed predispositions to expect failure and, thus, are often unwilling to take chances in learning situations (Kauffman and Payne, 1975; & Robinson and Robinson, 1976). Given this reality, management approaches which result in these students doubting their abilities further exacerbate an already regressive situation for the life progression of exceptional Black children.

Many potentially valuable management strategies are misused

and, as a consequence, cause deleterious effects on exceptional Black children. Although the literature indicates that the use of negative reinforcers, e.g., punishment, temporarily suppresses a student's behavior, the long-term effect on the student is quite questionable. Aronfreed (1968) argues that students often associate the act of punishment with the instructional environment. This negative association has the potential to be transferred outside the academic setting inhibiting the life-long maturation of exceptional Black children.

Other aversive techniques; such as criticism, sarcasm, nagging, corporal punishment, and the like, have the potential of making students develop negative attitudes toward the school environment. These negative evaluations provided by teachers have the potential of further attenuating the self-esteem of exceptional Black children, many of whom enter school with societal induced low estimates of themselves. Related also is the tendency for student behavior to become managerially dependent on this negative, external feedback and, subsequently, result in a decrease in students' abilities to become self-directing, self-reinforcing individuals.

One might be surprised that corporal punishment remains the most commonly used method to deal with problem students (Wright, 1978). Several studies (Pallas, 1973; Sussman, 1977; & Wattenberg, 1975) have shown that, notwithstanding professional and public controversy surrounding the use of corporal punishment, teachers depend heavily on it. It is apparent that teachers who use corporal punishment are

providing models of negative, aggressive behavior to students. The heuristic value of this type of model presented to exceptional Black children is quite questionable and tends to negatively impact on their life progression. Further, the use of punishment, sarcasm, criticism, and expulsion may serve to reinforce negative behavior through attention and serve to create a negative classroom climate wherein students lack initiative and are not self-motivated to positively change their behaviors (Polsgrove and Mosley, 1975).

It must be pointed out, in closing, that in certain situations, adequate external control may be required to deal with disruptive behavior on the part of exceptional Black children. Few teachers, however, have been taught to deal adequately with children's behavioral, motivational, and affective problems (Polsgrove and Mosley, 1975). This often results in the misapplication or overapplication of externally oriented management approaches on the part of the teachers who excessively rely on control tactics as opposed to liberating techniques. For us to move toward more liberating approaches of managing classroom behavior problems will require a reconceptualization of the role of the teacher. The teacher's role must be viewed within the context of facilitating self-direction and control on the part of the student and not within the traditional authoritarian context of acting as an agent of control. Both teachers and students will then become allies in this behavioral change process as opposed to antagonists. This new found mutual respect and cooperation has the potential of liberating teachers, as well as students.

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